

Shades of Gray: from the Adventures of Alex Winger

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Two hops. Three hours transit. Four solitary hours floating out in the middle of nowhere. The holonovels about the lives of undercover operatives brought a twinkle to Alex Winger's blue eyes. Quick raids in and out of enemy territory weren't the norm. Sometimes it was this: Sitting. Waiting. Watching.

Her wingman sat three thousand kilometers off to the port side of her X-wing. With any luck, they were far enough apart that at least one of them would survive if an Imperial armada jumped into the middle of their position. Surely the tip that Intel received about Imperial ships crossing this sector of space would pan out. Fifteen days on patrol had turned up no leads, and no one in Blue Squadron1 had seen hide nor hair of them.

Enjoy this quiet. It won't last. It never does. Alex closed her eyes--

"You will never be a Jedi. You are not strong."

"You don't know me!" Alex shouted, her eyes burning with tears. She glared at the black-caped figure standing over her. His lightsaber hummed menacingly only centimeters from her face. She felt her blood boil and her veins pop. Pain wracked her body. "No!" she cried out.



Alex drew in a sharp breath then scanned empty space for the hundredth time. Her scopes were dead, too, except for Blue Four. Her comrades in the squadron kidded her that she'd started this line of work when she was in diapers. At age 24, she had as much field experience as operatives who were 10 years older, honed with the resistance on Garos IV. They weren't sure why she had chosen to stay with them when she clearly had talents using the Force. They saw the lightsaber scar2 but never asked about it. With a rogue Jedi running around blowing up planets, it probably wasn't a prudent area of discussion. But Alex brushed that thought away for now. Kyp Durrón might be a bit rough around the edges, but he'd be all right. A respected Jedi Master in the future. She could feel that. She wished she felt more confidence in her own future.

You are not strong enough.

Alex grimaced as a pain shot down her arm. Some might consider the lightsaber scar a badge of honor. To Alex, it was a permanent reminder of her failure.

She tapped her instruments impatiently, readjusting her sensors. An alarm blared, and the R2 unit in her X-wing screeched.

"Three, two marks coming in off your starboard bow," Blue Four called. "Nothing else on the scope."

"Hang back, Four."

"Where are their friends, Three?"

"Still nothing."

"Fire up, Three. They've spotted you."

"Time to show 'em why they hired us, Four!"

"I'm already headed your way. The one on the right is mine."

Alex pointed her nose toward the TIE and opened fire. He returned her fire, then dove and scissored across the void. Alex whipped in behind him. She targeted the fighter and her quad laser cannons ripped through his engines, creating a fireball that lit black space.

"I'm picking up more eyeballs, Four," Alex reported as she cut back toward her wingman who was maneuvering to take on the second ship.

"Coming in behind him!" Four shouted. "Targeting ... just a second ... " He tapped the trigger mechanism. Laser blasts streaked from the X-wing as another TIE joined the ranks of the permanently departed. "Woo-hoo!"

"We've got the mothership in sensor range, Four," Alex called. "Time we left this show."

"See you at the rendezvous point," Blue Four replied. "Watch that eyeball coming in."

"I've got him." Alex dove toward the enemy fighter and opened fire as her wingman let a curse fly.

"Great Sith!" he shouted. "Behind you!"

Laser cannon fire stretched out across the blackness. Alex's X-wing rocked violently, hit by a powerful blast on the starboard bow. A moment later, the TIE behind her exploded in a fiery ball, caught by Four's lasers.

Alex struggled to maintain control of her starfighter. The X-wing rolled, twisting end over end. The Imperial Star Destroyer loomed directly in her path, eclipsing her view of the stars. Thousands of lights blinked along its massive gray hull. Alex could hear the desperate calls from her wingman as she fought to get her bearings.

"Blue Three, do you copy?"

"I'm okay, Chaz," Alex called into the comlink, vaguely aware of the blood trickling down her forehead.

"Where'd that one come from?" she asked as she caught sight of two more TIE fighters skimming the surface of the big ship moving directly toward her position.

"Let's move, Alex!"

Alex scanned her instruments. "Hyperdrive's gone, Chaz. You know the drill. Get out." She targeted one of the approaching TIEs, gently touched the triggering mechanism of her quad-linked laser cannons, and watched the Imperial fighter go up in flames. The second TIE swung around to come in behind her. Somehow, she knew that the Imperial pilot had targeted her X-wing in his sights.

"Pull up, Three! Pull up!" Chaz shouted.

Another blast bathed Alex's X-wing in light, and one of her starboard engines burst into flames. As the starfighter plummeted toward the surface of the Imperial ship, Alex was slammed hard against her restraints. There was a second blinding flash of light. And just before the darkness took her, Alex could have sworn she felt someone reaching out to her through the Force.

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Excruciating pain shot down Alex's arm. She stared at her jacket, the fabric burnt, slashed through right down to her skin. Sweat pouring from her face, she looked up at the imposing dark-caped figure standing at the top of the dune. He stood silently as if in judgment, the hiss of his lightsaber the only sound that pierced the thick night air. "Why are you doing this?" she screamed at him.

Jolted from restless sleep, Alex awoke and tried to catch her breath. She rubbed her palm against the scar that stretched across her upper arm. The memories of that fateful day on Garos IV were still vivid, the pain very real. The scar cut deeper than flesh. It was a reminder of what she had done -- of her brush with the dark side.

Fear ... anger ... Why did the memory of that day refuse to die? The emotions hung over her like a deathly pallor. The dark Jedi had not killed her. Why? *Why?* He taunted her in her dreams, and in quiet wakeful moments. He made her doubt that she had the strength to learn to control the Force. A tear trickled down Alex's cheek. Fear and anger had taken her to the dark side once, and it took every ounce of strength she had to keep them at bay now. They were always there, casting a shadow over everything she did.

Alex brushed away the tear and rubbed her eyes, grimacing as she touched her bruised and aching temple. She moved her head ever-so-slightly. Groaning softly, she forced herself to view her surroundings in the dimly lit room. Medical diagnostic equipment blinked yellows and greens, and the antiseptic smells of the sick bay hung in the air. A dozen beds in the large room lay empty.

Alex shuddered, recalling the final moments in her X-wing before she'd passed out. *Imperial Star Destroyer.* She'd been on a collision course with an Imperial Star Destroyer.

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Alex lost track of days that seemed endless, days that ran into sleepless nights. The quiet of her cell was broken only by the dull drone of the ship's engines. Nightmares intruded on what little sleep she could find. She was exhausted and unable to push away the shadows of her encounter with the dark side. She had far too much time to think.

There were no distractions, no visits. No questions. Nothing. She saw no one, not even the droids who delivered two meals a day through a slot in the door.

It was a relief when the ship finally made orbit around some distant world and stormtroopers led her to a shuttle bound planet-side. She studied the landscape looming outside the viewport. Snow-capped peaks and crystal blue lakes seemed an odd contrast to valleys scarred by war. A city sprawled along one lakefront, many



of its buildings in ruins. Imperial vehicles of all shapes and sizes rumbled through the streets. Not a single civilian vehicle could be seen. The spaceport was in disrepair but crammed with Imperial transports. It was like a hundred other worlds she'd seen devastated by the Galactic Civil War.

Her escorts whisked her away to an older, imposing building near the city center. Prison facilities were in a sub-basement three floors below ground level. Her cell was one of many off a dimly lit corridor that stank of mold, unwashed inhabitants, and dead animals. There was a palpable sense of hopelessness and fear emanating from the cell block. The last thing she heard before the door to her new home slid shut was the uncontrollable sobbing of another prisoner being dragged down the corridor.

Three days passed before she had human contact. Stormtroopers escorted her upstairs and prodded her through the fourth-floor hallway. Tall, arch-shaped windows with scrollwork and detailed engravings lined the wide corridors. Alex studied the grounds beyond the building as her eyes adjusted to the light streaming inside. A fence skirted the perimeter of the compound about a hundred meters out, obscured in places by dense overgrowth. Guard towers dotted the area, but they obviously were hastily constructed additions. A dozen or more speeder bikes were parked at the base of one tower, near the main entrance, and a tree-lined avenue led away from the building. Shells of skytowers made of duracrete and transparisteel loomed in the distance against a cloudless rose-colored sky.

A half-dozen doorways lined the corridor. One at the end of the hallway was clearly marked as a stairwell, which she mentally noted as a possible escape route. The floor was deserted except for her guards, a couple of human presences she sensed behind closed doorways, and one additional stormtrooper who came through the stairwell door. She had the strangest sensation as he walked past her, but brushed it off, blaming it on a lack of sleep.

One guard prompted her to enter a large room that was sparsely furnished with an old desk and a table surrounded by four ancient-looking kirechawood chairs. A dark brown sofa, its fabric frayed in spots, was carelessly shoved against one wall, with three smaller side chairs lined up near the window.

Alex walked toward the large picture window on the far side of the room and glanced outside. The rear of the building boasted a shaded courtyard but its paths were overgrown with weeds that wound around bushes that hadn't been pruned in years. Rust-covered black benches encircled a fountain filled with murky grayish-green water. She wondered if the place had been well kept in better times.

"Away from the window, Lieutenant," the stormtrooper ordered.

Alex frowned at him but moved toward the desk at the center of the room. "What's happening, Captain? Seems rather late in the day to begin interrogations."

Footsteps sounded in the corridor before the trooper could reply. Straightening, he held his weapon at the ready.

Alex turned to face the newcomers. Two more stormtroopers entered the room and moved to either side of the door to allow another figure to pass.

"Wait outside," Captain Brandei³ told the soldiers, entering the room with hands clasped tightly behind his back, as though he were inspecting his fleet.

Alex still felt weak several days after her capture, but she did her best to stand at attention. She studied the captain. There were more strands of silver running through his hair than when she'd seen him last.

Brandei walked to the window, then finally spoke without looking her way. "I see you've decided to rejoin the living."

"That was your ship. The *Judicator*."

He nodded. "A strange turn of affairs, isn't it?"

"Well, I'm surprised it took you so long to check in on me."

Brandei scoffed. "I hadn't intended to see you at all, Alexandra. You disgust me."

"Is this how you welcome the daughter of your old friend, the Imperial Governor?" Alex asked, her voice strong, confident, and with an air of arrogance that sounded foreign to her own ears.

Brandei turned slowly, glaring at her unforgivingly before replying with a tone as icy as the plains of Hoth. "Please, Alexandra. Don't patronize me. You are a Rebel, pure and simple. I can only imagine how the man who brought you up as his own must have felt when he realized he raised a traitor to the Empire."

Alex held her head high, fixing her eyes on the captain. His words might be cruel, truthful even, but nothing he said would erase her knowledge of the Empire's atrocities.

"Why am I here, Captain?" she asked as he sat at the desk.

"I'm not really sure, my dear. We aren't in the habit of capturing X-wing pilots. The tractor crew is being questioned, your ship thoroughly searched. Why they brought you on board is far beyond me. A mistake, I suppose. Some new operator in the pit crew, perhaps." He frowned, his brow wrinkling. "Imagine my surprise when I discovered your identity."

Alex's eyes remained transfixed on Brandei, but she said nothing.

"No wonder the rebels on Garos had so much success. They had an inside line to Imperial activities coming right out of the Governor's mansion."

"It helped." Alex smiled humorlessly, ignoring the painful memories of working behind her adoptive father's back. It wasn't something Brandei would have understood. "I must congratulate you, Captain."

"Oh? What have I done?"

"You've been able to keep the *Judicator* out of Admiral Daala's hands, which means you aren't one of her lapdogs. Lucky for you, since she's managed to destroy almost every ship in her fleet."

Brandei regarded her for a moment, and Alex wondered if he was aware of recent events in the Maw Cluster. His sabacc face was very good. "You do get around, don't you? I don't think you need to be concerned about the Admiral's activities," he scoffed. "However, you might be interested to learn what prompted my visit."

"Let me guess. I'm about to be interrogated by cruel and inhuman means, and you want me to cooperate so they'll go easy on me."

"Such impudence! Your father wouldn't recognize you. Perhaps you won't be so cocky when I tell you why I'm here."

"Leave my father out of this."

"I can't do that, Alexandra. He is under arrest, you see."

"What?"

"There are those who want him prosecuted for collaborating with the enemy."

"With me? That's ridiculous! You know as well as I -- "

"It does not matter what I know or think. Command has eyewitness accounts -- "

"Accounts of me attending official functions with my father? Visiting Imperial Headquarters? What does that prove? Some friend you turned out to be."

"You brought this down on him yourself, my dear. There was nothing I could do to stop it."

"I doubt you even tried," Alex sneered. "You, better than anyone, know my father is innocent. You certainly wouldn't want your superiors' eyes focused on you, would you? It was your ship, after all, that brought me to Garos after that Imperial raid. You are the one responsible for saving my life, Captain," she added matter-of-factly. "I guess that makes you responsible for the fall of Garos IV."

Brandei laughed. "You think so highly of yourself, Alexandra," he spat. "You need to recognize what you've become. You broke your father's spirit -- and now the Empire is breaking his mind."

"I don't believe you."

"Please stop this charade, Alexandra. Your father is one of my oldest and dearest friends. I would spare him this pain, terminate you here and now. That would be the most civilized -- "

"Civilized?" Alex pounded the desk. "You call what the Judicator did on Janara III civilized?"

Brandei jerked back, startled by her outburst. He hesitated, then cleared his throat before responding to her accusation. "The High Inquisitor's orders came from the Emperor himself. The Rebel stronghold there -- "

"There was no Rebel stronghold there, and you know that! You saw the destruction yourself." Alex tried to keep her anger at bay as an intense, sharp pain coursed up her arm and across her shoulders. She clenched her fist tightly and glared at Brandei. "Innocent children and their families were murdered by your weapons!"

"Don't try to hide behind that ancient history," Brandei said coldly, never acknowledging what Alex knew firsthand. He stared out the window. "Had I known the grief you would bring your father, I would have left you buried in the rubble on Janara III."

Alex swallowed hard. "Where is my father?"

"As I said, he's under arrest."

"Is he here? I'd like to see him before I -- "

"What you'd like is of no consequence. You have no rights here. Even if I knew where he was being held, I would deny your request. You have already hurt him enough."

"So what happens now, Captain?"

"You be will turned over to authorities -- "

"For execution?" she interrupted.

If Brandei were taken aback by her bluntness, he showed no reaction other than to clear his throat. "For *interrogation*." He met her gaze. "But you are correct, of course. Execution is the only response to your treasonous activities. Think how humiliating it will be for your father to see you paraded before a tribunal. Humiliating and painful. Did you ever consider his feelings?"

Alex turned away. *More than you will ever know.*

"Everyone will know his shame." Brandei shook his head sadly.

A tear fought to escape from the corner of Alex's eye.

"You'd better cooperate, Alexandra," the Imperial said. "I tell you this for your father's sake, not yours. Things will only get worse for him if you do not."

Heat rose in Alex's cheeks. "Your threats are meaningless, Captain."

"I don't make threats. Spare your father's life. Let him live out the remainder of his days in a manner befitting that of a loyal former governor. Tell them everything you know about your Rebel friends, and no further disgrace will befall him." He moved closer to her. "What were your orders?"

Alex shrugged. "I don't know anything that might be of interest to your interrogators, Captain. I'm just an X-wing pilot." He didn't need to know about the mission briefings describing the unusual activity they'd been sent to investigate in this sector.

Brandei reached for the intercom on his desk and tapped the call button. "Well, let's just hope you come up with something to interest them, then. Soon. Your father's life may depend on it," he added as the door into the office slid open and a major named Retkin entered the room. "If you would," he said, pointing toward one of the chairs at the table.

Alex took a seat. Retkin sat down across from her and tapped his datapad. Two holos came to life at the head of the table. Alex felt as if the air had been sucked from her lungs.

"Now," Retkin asked, "shall we begin?"

Alex stared at the holos of her father and Dair Haslip, a member of the Garosian underground who served as a lieutenant in the Imperial Army. Both men appeared to have been beaten. Their clothes were disheveled and dirty, their hair unkempt. Tork Winger's face looked drawn and pale.

"What have you done to them?" she asked, her trembling voice betraying her failed façade of calmness and cloaking a rage that was building with each passing minute.

"Does that really require explanation?"

"You've beaten two innocent men. I should've guessed that the Empire would use tactics like this. But you didn't get one useful thing out of my father or Dair. How could you have? They had no idea -- not the faintest knowledge -- about my activities."

"That is history. We have you now. And you will tell us -- "

"I will tell you nothing."

"That would be unfortunate," Brandei said, looking at the holos. "I cannot say with any certainty that your father will survive another interrogation session."

"My father has friends in high places."

Retkin snorted. "Those friends deserted him the moment they learned you had been working undercover for the Rebellion. Now he has no friends -- he has only a daughter who betrayed him."

Alex studied the holos, wondering how recently they'd been recorded. She desperately wanted to believe they'd been faked ... but she couldn't be sure. She shifted her gaze to Brandei and struggled to read his expression.

Retkin chuckled. "Haslip laughed through his pain when we told him you'd been captured flying an X-wing. He said that we'd captured the best pilot on Garos IV."

Alex wanted to smile but held her stone-face. "That sounds like Dair," she replied.

"You should know, I suppose. He was your boyfriend, after all." Retkin held up a hand, a slight smirk curling his lip. "Forgive me. The poor fellow *thought* he was your boyfriend." The interrogator studied her face intently, then turned to notes on his datapad and silently paged down, purposefully ignoring her. He finally looked back up, cocked his head and narrowed his eyes. "They found the transponder on your ship, Lieutenant. No one knows where you are. No one is coming after you. Your situation is hopeless."

Alex inhaled deeply, her tone hardening. "You really don't know much about me, do you, Major? 'Hopeless' isn't part of my vocabulary."

"So you won't cooperate with us, then?"

Alex glanced toward the holo as that familiar burning sensation start to build again. "I want to speak to them," she said defiantly.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible. They are not here. Besides, I doubt either man would want to see you after all that has happened. Haslip feels like a fool because he never saw through your lies and deception. And your father wishes you'd never been brought to Garos."

"Why are you lying to me?" Alex asked, her fist tightly clenched.

"Not so cocky now, are you, Alexandra?" Brandei stood and walked back toward the window.

"I saw the vid of one of the interrogation sessions," Retkin stated curtly. "Your lover was very brave early on. Quite talkative, too. He claimed that anything we did would not compare to what you had done to him."

Alex knew the truth of her relationship with Dair, but had to play the game -- for his sake, as much as for her own. "He would have done the same if he'd been in my position."

"All those years -- you spied on him, and on the Empire's operations on Garos. You even spied on your own father!"

Alex closed her eyes for a moment, and a wry smile brushed her face. "He didn't make it easy. He placed guards around our home. How's a girl supposed to sneak out at night?" Pain suddenly arched across her shoulders and down her arm. You are not strong enough.

"What's wrong?" Brandei asked, gazing down at her hands as she grasped the edge of the table to dull the ache.

"Nothing. I'm fine," she replied through gritted teeth. "Just let me see my father."

"You must cooperate with us."

"Where is my father?"

Retkin glanced at Brandei, who gave a quick nod. "If you talk, I will see what I can do."

"You said he's not here."

"So I did."

"Where exactly are we?"

"No one told you?" Retkin smiled and glanced at Brandei. "Perhaps we have a bargaining chip here, Captain."

"I believe you are correct, Mr. Retkin," Brandei replied smugly. "Alexandra, welcome to Sreina. You're on Janara III."

Alex bolted from her chair and rushed to the window. She wanted to feel something -- anything -- familiar. She closed her eyes and reached out with the Force to touch this world on which she'd lost so much. Explosions, a woman's screams, and a man moaning bombarded her senses ... then deathly silence. *"Over here." Voices called out through the haze. "Over here, sir. She's alive."*

A tear slid down Alex's cheek. This place had been her home, so long ago. *A thousand or more lives to find one little girl and a handful of Jedi hopefuls.*

"It must be a shock to find you're a prisoner here," Brandei said.

Alex could not tell -- did not even try to tell -- if the captain was being sincere. She forgot her special ops training for a moment as emotions overwhelmed her, and she didn't care that she was sharing private thoughts with her enemy. "I used to dream about returning here. I have so few childhood memories of this place." Her limited Force abilities provided no answers. "This was my home, but there is such emptiness ... and desolation."

"At least there is something here," Retkin replied.

Alex looked back angrily at him. "The former inhabitants of Sreina might disagree, since their city was virtually wiped off the map."

Retkin stiffened. "Better than what those who called Carida home are left with. You have heard of Carida?"

This had to be the strangest interrogation on record, Alex decided, as she followed the major's cue. "My father attended the academy there."

He nodded. "It's gone now, you know. Not just a city -- an entire planet. Millions of people. For all your talk of Imperial atrocities, your New Republic kills innocents, too."

"The destruction of Carida was not at the hands of the New Republic!"

"Jedi serve the New Republic."

"One misguided -- "

"Isn't that what your people said about Emperor Palpatine?"

"Enough!" Brandei shouted.

Retkin stared blankly at Alex, then at Brandei. Clearing his throat, he flicked a key on his datapad, summoning another holo.

"We were more than friends," Dair said. "She lied. How could she do this? How do you think that made me feel after we'd ... after all we meant to each other? I don't know what you want from me. She used me."

Alex turned away from Retkin again, scanning the grounds outside. There were no bars on the fourth floor window, no locks, and no security system she could detect. She ignored Dair's voice on the holo but pretended she was upset by the harshness in her old friend's words. For a brief moment, she could have sworn she felt Dair's presence. Closing her eyes, she tried to concentrate on her surroundings.

"You better not hurt him," Alex said quietly, her face flushing with anger. That tingling sensation snaked up her arm again, and the pain made her grimace.

Retkin tapped the keypad and Dair's image came to life once more.

"She would rather save her friends than help her father -- than be with me." Dair's face creased with contempt. *"She never loved me."* The holo faded.

"Will you talk?"

Alex stood stone-faced.

"I have many more hours I could show you," Retkin added. "The beatings are especially cruel and difficult to watch. I would certainly like to see just how unfeeling you are, Lieutenant. Can you watch us beat your boyfriend -- we were quite thorough in our ... debriefing -- or will you tell us what we want to know?"

Again, the interrogator put up a hand. "Excuse me. Haslip was not your boyfriend, I know. Just some Imperial lieutenant captivated by your charm and foolish enough to fall in love with you. On the other hand, there is your father." Retkin eyed her, not expecting a response. "He said he would not watch us kill you."

Retkin's words slammed her like the deadly stroke of a lightsaber. Pain stripped away the thin shield that had kept Alex's emotions in check. Flashes of her encounter with Brandl and the dark energy she summoned to save her father engulfed her mind as her anger, fueled by pain, grew into a burning rage.

Alex bowled into Brandei, knocking him to the floor, and reached for the only item in the room that could be used as a weapon: a chair. It moved slightly though she never laid a hand on it. She recognized what was happening -- couldn't believe what was happening -- and channeled the energy, waved her arm, and Force-tossed the chair halfway across the room. It flew at Retkin and glanced off his head, the brunt of it lashing his arms as he fended off her attack. She grabbed a second chair and charged toward him, swinging it at his head as he attempted to stand, and the blow knocked him unconscious.

Alex ran for the door and headed down the hallway toward the stairwell, footsteps sounding in the corridor behind her. She turned to get a quick look. One lone stormtrooper was on her tail as she pushed her way into the dimly lit stairwell. She took several steps at a time, then jumped over a railing to the landing below. The stormtrooper crashed through the door above her.

"Stop," he shouted. "Alex! Stop!"

Alex halted in her tracks, staring back up the stairs as the stormtrooper hit the landing. "Put your hands up," he shouted. Then quietly, he added, "Alex, it's me."

"Dair? When did you join the stormtrooper corps?"

"Not much time," he replied as he moved down the stairs to catch up to her. "They'll be on to you -- "

"Well, c'mon then. Let's get out of here!" Alex urged, taking another step down.

Dair caught her arm. "No. Not yet. We'd never get out of the compound." He glanced in either direction, then asked quickly, "How can I contact your people?"

Alex rattled off a series of numbers, which he repeated. Dair ran his hand lightly across her cheek, smoothing his thumb across the dark circles beneath her eyes. "You look like a bantha dragged you across the desert!"

"They don't let me sleep much. My turn to face their inquisition," she shrugged. "How did you know I was here?"

"Some people talk too much."

"Won't they be watching you?" Alex asked.

Dair shook his head. "Honestly, with all the bureaucracy, I think they've forgotten I'm here!"

"Wait," Alex said, "if you're not under arrest, then where is my father? Brandei and that major threatened to harm both of you if I don't talk."

"A lot has happened, Alex -- too much to rattle off in a few seconds. We will get you out of here," he added, suddenly aware of a commotion in the hallway. "Get in front of me. Hurry!"

"Move it!" he shouted, his Blastech A280 aimed menacingly at her back.

"This better work," she replied as the door on the fourth floor landing swung open. Dair gave her a shove for good measure.

"We've got her, Captain," another trooper at the top of the stairs reported as a half dozen more footsteps sounded in the corridor.

Dair prodded Alex up the stairs and into the corridor. Brandei stood a few meters away, looking slightly disheveled, a dark bruise forming on his temple. "What were you thinking, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"I was just doing my duty, Captain." Alex felt another blaster rifle pressed between her shoulders. She moved down the corridor with several stormtroopers and one friend on her heels.

Brandei glared at her. "Take Lieutenant Winger back to detention."

Alex walked past him.

"Such a pity," Brandei said.

Alex stopped, turning to face the Imperial one last time. "What's that, Captain?"

"That your life's been wasted pursuing the worthless ideals of a band of malcontents."

"Worthless?" she shot back. "Even now, those ideals are racing like a firestorm throughout the galaxy -- a firestorm you'll never be able to extinguish, no matter how many planets you butcher, or how many people you torture."

"Please, no political slogans."

"Why, did you get tired of hearing the Emperor spout them endlessly?" she chided.

Brandei sneered. "I always thought you would go far, Alexandra. That was why I gave you that recommendation to Raithal Academy. Now I find my faith in you betrayed. I can live with that. But you also betrayed everything your father believed in and worked for. At least now you won't have to live long with that knowledge."

Alex did not flinch, her eyes burning intensely. "Each of us has to pick a cause to believe in, Captain. I made my choice the day my family died on Janara III. I think my father understands." She studied Brandei for a moment, then continued. "You know, Captain, it's funny. It was your act of kindness, rescuing me after that attack, that has led us here today. Can you live with that knowledge?" She turned abruptly and walked down the corridor before Brandei could say another word.

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Alex blew a puff of air across her sweat-streaked face and pressed her feet firmly into attack stance. Her fingers wrapped around the lightsaber's hilt, and she was amazed that the weapon felt like an extension of her gloved hand.

She angled the weapon toward her opponent. His tall, lithesome figure cast a shadow across the ground between them, his shoulder-length brownish hair blowing in rhythm with his billowing cape. He eyed her cautiously, bringing his own lightsaber down slowly to meet hers. A sizzling noise cut the drenching afternoon air as fire danced across the Jedi's swords.

The knight feinted right, then lunged toward Alex. She repelled his attack and countered, stepping toward him so deliberately and forcefully that she momentarily caught him off guard. Her lightsaber crashed downward, cutting across his with one sharp blow, and then another.

Alex stopped, drew in a breath. A small grin curled the edges of her mouth, her blue, almond-shaped eyes sparking like the lightsaber in her hands.

"You must teach me that trick," he said, his own breaths coming hard.

Alex lunged forward again, driving the Jedi toward the edge of the clearing. The more experienced fighter struggled to riposte, but Alex deftly twisted her wrists and caught his saber, forcing it from his grip. He threw Alex a smile.

"Your practice has paid off!" he exclaimed. "Master Skywalker will be pleased."

Alex awoke from the dream, her heart racing. Every breath came hard. She stared at her hand and flexed it, remembering the feel of the lightsaber. There was something right, something familiar in the vision.

Searing pain crossed her shoulders, shooting a fiery snake down her arm that violently shattered the vision of hope. Alex cried out in agony. The slash of the dark Jedi's lightsaber tortured her, refusing to stay buried in the past. *You are not strong enough.*

She cradled her arm. "Leave me alone!" she shouted to the shadowy apparition as lights in her cell flickered on and off. That nightly ritual had started shortly after her arrival on Janara III. She was used to the pattern: The lights grew bright, then suddenly extinguished. A minute later, the flickering began anew.

Another prisoner down the cell block cried out. She desperately wanted to tell him everything would be alright. She concentrated, stretching out through the Force and projecting feelings of serenity.

Footsteps in the corridor broke her concentration. They slowed, then stopped at her cell door. She sat up as the door slid open. A lone stormtrooper entered, his hand held up as if to shush her.

Her senses heightened, Alex felt the familiar presence. "Dair?"

The new arrival tugged at his stormtrooper helmet and pulled it off. "I didn't get to say it earlier, but I've missed you!"

Alex smiled, but her eyes drifted warily around the room before meeting his. "We're alone?"

Dair nodded. "They haven't had time yet to retrofit the cells in this building with any high-tech security," he said as he approached the cot. "You had me worried earlier today when I walked right past you in the corridor and you didn't recognize me. I thought you'd lost your touch."

"How do you know I couldn't tell it was you?"

"Oh, I've known you too long. You get that look in your eyes."

"You're okay?" she asked, changing the subject. "Retkin showed me some awful vids -- "

Dair signaled to cut her off. "There was a prisoner exchange a few weeks after the Battle of Garos. It was conducted on short notice, and I was filthy because I'd been assigned to help with salvage efforts in downtown Ariana."

"After you'd been shot? Dair, I'm so sorry I couldn't -- "

"Quiet. We had to play the game and you know it. It was the only way I could maintain my cover."

"But those vids -- "

"Those were from questioning after we'd been turned over to the Judicator. It wasn't nearly as bad as it looked. Your father had a lot of pull with the Imps. He managed to get me assigned as his aide."

"Where is my father? If you're here, then -- "

Dair's face grew grim. "They've been lying to you, Alex," he said quietly, taking her hands into his. "After we left Garos, Brandei was the governor's staunchest supporter. He knew your father remained loyal to the Empire. They never arrested him. He answered their questions, but they never interrogated him. Brandei wouldn't let them. And now they cannot."

Alex grew pale. "No." Tears welled in her eyes. "No. Please don't -- "

"He died three months ago," Dair replied softly, wrapping his arms around her. "I'm so sorry."



Alex buried her face in Dair's chest and wept. She'd lost every member of her family. She was a toddler when her mother died. Then her grandparents were killed here on Janara III. Her father, Matt Turhaya, a commander in SpecForces, had been killed during the invasion of Garos IV. Now the man who had adopted her, whom she cared for deeply despite his politics, was gone.

Dair held Alex tightly and gently stroked her hair. He fought back the lump in his throat. "His heart was weak, Alex. He was never the same after that assassination attempt on Garos." Dair lifted her chin and gently wiped the tears from her face.

"When you say 'good-bye' to someone, you really mean 'see you later.'" Alex's lips trembled. "This wasn't supposed to happen. I was going to talk to him again. I wanted to make him understand why -- "

"Shh," Dair said quietly. "It wouldn't have made any difference."

"How can you say that?" she asked pulling away from his embrace.

"He loved you, Rebel scum or not. After we left Garos there wasn't a day that went by when he didn't have an Alex story to tell." A soft smile lit Dair's face as he reached down to squeeze her hand. "He beamed when he talked about dinnertime rituals at the governor's mansion, and your record at University -- that time you had half of Ariana's air defense system ready to shoot down your shuttle. He remembered how you always impressed the dignitaries and military brass who visited."

"Please, stop. You didn't see him the night I told him I worked for the Rebels on Garos. I wasn't the loyal Imperial daughter he always thought he'd raised. I didn't want to fly TIE fighters. I wanted to shoot them down! I hurt him badly, Dair."

"Time erased some of that pain."

Alex studied her old friend's face. "I hope you're right."

"Are you ready to get to work?"

"You made contact with my network?"

Dair nodded. "Sounds like they can manage a pretty big show. Big guns. Lots of firepower."

"More than just a tidy little rescue mission, eh?" she said. "New Republic Intelligence was right about Imperial activities in this sector. You must've confirmed that for them. What are the Imps up to?"

"Factories are coming online to build starfighters here. Tons of equipment is being shipped in. Weapons are being stockpiled."

"You provided some good targeting data?"

"Absolutely," he confirmed. "The attack will serve as a diversion for us. After the missions you've been on, getting out of here will be like child's play. Janara III is going to light up like a -- "

Alex winced as another pain shot down her arm.

"What's wrong?"

"Janara III." She said it slowly, her gaze fixed on the stark gray walls of the prison cell. "I used to live here. My grandparents died here." Cradling her arm, Alex stood up then turned to face her old friend. "Brandl told me why the Empire attacked this world."

"Jaalib Brandl? How would he know -- " Dair frowned. "Alex, would you actually trust anything he said? He tried to assassinate your father!"

"Jaalib's father led the mission. You've heard of the Emperor's Jedi hunters?"

The vacuum of space couldn't have been more silent. Dair wrinkled his brow and Alex could see him piecing the puzzle together. "You?" So many things about the young woman before him suddenly seemed clear. Things he'd attributed as intuition or an uncanny danger sense were far more than that. "They were looking for you," Dair stated thoughtfully. "You really do have a special power -- "

"That's not always a good thing."

"What do you mean?"

Alex removed her jacket and revealed the jagged lightsaber scar on her arm.

Dair stifled the urge to curse. "Did Brandl do that to you?"

Alex placed her hands on Dair's shoulders to calm him, and to steady her own shaking hands. "It doesn't matter," she said unconvincingly. She stared past Dair. The stench of bleeding flesh, the broken bones and the choking smoke left in the aftermath of an assassin's bomb were as clear to her at that moment as they had been on Garos. Sharp rocks and glass tore her hands, which ached as she struggled to reach her father. "Brandl said I wasn't strong enough. He knew anger would make me powerful." A single tear fell across her cheek as she gazed up at Dair. "I couldn't let my father die."

Dair's expression softened. "Of course not." Gently, he pushed a stray hair from her eyes and wiped her tear away. "So you're a Jedi?"

Alex shook her head. "Brandl showed me the dark side of the Force. He made me see something in myself that I'm not proud of. Everywhere I turn reminds me of what I did."

"You saved the governor's life, Alex. This power -- "

"-- is far too alluring," she interjected, "too dangerous. It frightens me."

"Can you control it?"

During the last few months, she'd increasingly felt the strain of emotions tugging at her whenever friends had been in danger. "I'm trying."

"And what happens if you can't? What happens the next time you get angry?"

"I don't think that -- "

"I wouldn't be so sure. Not the way you're talking. Is that how you want to live the rest of your life?"

"Of course not."

"Then why are you out here flying missions for the New Republic when you should be exploring your power?"

"Didn't you hear me? I don't think I'm strong enough to resist the lure of the dark side."

"Well, not training won't make you any stronger -- it only leaves you vulnerable."

She shook her head. "I'm not ready. I've already proven that. Painfully."

"Well, you don't have to do this on your own, do you?"

Alex turned away and faced the stark gray cell wall. *We will meet again, Alex.* "I've heard Luke Skywalker is re-establishing the Jedi Order. He's been training students on Yavin."

"Don't you belong with them?"

She faced him again, shaking her head. "He wouldn't want me there. Not after what I've done."

Dair forced her to look into his dark eyes. "The Alex Winger I knew didn't give up so easily."

"Leave me alone!" she cried, twisting from his grasp. "I'm trying, don't you see that?"

"You're scared. I get that. But that's never held you back before." Dair stood abruptly and grabbed his helmet. "I'd better go. Get some rest. I'll see you in a few days."

Alex rubbed the palm of her hand across the old lightsaber scar, tracing her finger along its jagged edge. There was truth to what Dair had said, she knew. The dark side was not absolute in its hold. Luke Skywalker had been to the dark side and returned. Even the legendary Ulic Qel-Droma had eventually come back to the light. Then there was Kyp Durrón, whose future she was sure she'd seen, even clearer than her own. He would be a great Jedi Master. But her own future was gray, hidden beneath shadows cast by the dark Jedi. Brandl's influence needed to end. Now.

* * *

"I wondered if you'd come back after the way our visit ended the other day," Alex said as Dair slipped into her cell.

"I figured you were sleep-deprived. Nothing personal," he replied. "I tried to get in yesterday, without luck. I wanted to give you a little warning before this operation begins, but you know what they say about the best-laid plans."

"So what is the plan?"

"There's a few dozen guards between this room and the spaceport." Dair pulled a datacard from his trousers, rubbing his forefinger across it. "This will get us out of the building if we get stopped. There's an OP-5 waiting for us outside the door, and a shuttle all prepped at the spaceport."

"Sounds far too easy. And you know what they say about that!"

Dair's chrono beeped. "Time to go. Ready?" he asked, noticing that far-off look in Alex's eyes. "What is it?"

She reached out with the Force. "One guard. He's approaching the door."

"That was quick." Dair planted himself against the wall near the door as an explosion sounded in the distance. "I thought we wouldn't run into anyone until we headed out of the cell bay."

The door slid open. Alex stared at the stormtrooper who entered the room. The soldier caught sight of Dair. "Who are you?" he asked, swinging up his blaster rifle.

Alex laid her hands on the gun's barrel and pulled the trooper into the room. Dair cracked him over the head, and the man hit the floor with a thud. Alex tossed the A280 to Dair. "After you," he said, motioning her into the deserted corridor.

They moved like boetays down the hallway, up a deserted stairwell, and turned into the main rotunda. Two security guards looked up from the desk. One nodded casually at Dair, who shoved Alex toward the prison's exit. He nudged her with the blaster rifle as another large explosion rocked the plaza beyond the entrance. Alarms blared.

"Hold it, Lieutenant," one of the guards called.



Dair turned. "I don't think so." He blasted both guards as Alex raced out the door, bounded down the stairs, and headed toward the OP-5 landspeeder parked near the entrance. She jumped into the vehicle with Dair just a few steps behind.

Alex glanced skyward as four X-wings streaked overhead and ripped a building just to the north. Two more starfighters blasted across Janara's rose-tinted sky from the west. Dair gunned the landspeeder into gear and sped down the wide avenue, ignoring the frantic hails of guards at the gate.

Alex threw a huge smile his way. "Nice diversion."

"Told you I gave your friends some good targeting information."

Alex studied the road behind them. "No sign of pursuit yet. Guess they're a bit busy."

"We'll be lucky to have a five-minute head start." Dair threw a sidelong glance at her. "Are you all right?"

"Just wondering if you've had enough of your Imperial life."

"Do you think I could find a nice safe desk job?"

"You're awfully valuable to the New Republic, Dair."

"They'd only have your word on that. I'm not sure if I'll know how to act if I'm not serving behind enemy lines."

"We'll give you a week or two to get used to it."

He laughed. "I do have one request, though."

"What's that?"

"Chances are there won't be help on the inside next time, so would you promise me you'll stay out of Imperial prisons from now on?"

Alex squeezed his arm gently. "I'll promise if you return to Garos."

Dair smiled at her. "I'll go back when you do!"

Alex sensed that he knew she wouldn't be returning to Garos. Smiling to herself, she studied Dair's profile, relieved that he was leaving his Imperial service. Her thoughts strayed back to her father, however, and her heart ached once again. She wondered if he would have understood that in this struggle, there were no simple answers. There were no blacks and whites -- not for her, not for Dair. Only grays.

Dair pointed at the landspeeder's storage compartment. "Check it out. Couple of extras in case we need them."

Alex rummaged through the compartment and found the objects of his interest. "One for me, one for you," she said. Alex checked the blaster-pack charges, then set the two DL-18s between them and picked up the A280 that he'd taken from the guard at the prison. "Okay, my friend, I'm ready if you are."

"Keep your eyes open," Dair said.

A half-dozen Imperial ships poured into view, rising above warehouses on the outskirts of the spaceport to pursue the New Republic attackers. Dair guided the OP-5 past the first set of buildings and into a stream of vehicles scrambling to deliver pilots to other ships.

Alex quickly scanned the airfield. "Okay, where's this shuttle you mentioned?" she asked as they passed a row of dilapidated buildings.

"Just beyond that tower," Dair said, cocking his head toward a tall gray structure in the distance. "Everyone seems to be occupied by your friends. They haven't been warned about our arrival."

"You may be wrong about that," Alex said. "Two scout troopers coming in on your left."

Alex gripped the blaster rifle tightly as the landspeeder moved into the open. She rested its barrel on the side of the vehicle, her sights set on the rapidly approaching speeder bikes.

"They're moving in quick!" Alex shouted. "Gun it!"

Dair pounded the accelerator and shouted back, "We'll never outrun 'em!"

"Just head for that shuttle!" Alex exclaimed, bringing her blaster to bear on the troopers but holding her fire. A few more seconds before they were in range ...

Alex fired, but the first shot went wide when Dair swerved around a slow-moving skiff. Her second shot found its mark. "Got him!" she cried as one vehicle burst into flames, tumbled end over end, and smashed into the tarmac. The second bike swung wide, barely avoiding the burning wreckage.

A shot from the opposite direction winged the landspeeder. "More company," Dair said as he let loose a few shots with the DL-18 and zipped between buildings.

"One still behind us, too!" Alex took aim and fired. Sparks flew from the speeder bike's engine as another scout trooper came through an alleyway and was suddenly neck to neck with the landspeeder. He fired at Dair, missing by only a centimeter or two. Alex grabbed the controls from Dair and swung the landspeeder sharply to the left.

"Hey!" Dair shouted. "What are you doing!" From the corner of his eye, he noticed the speeder bike slam into the side of the landspeeder before it careened wildly out of control. He threw a quick grin in Alex's direction.

Their troubles weren't over. Alex noticed two blurs that whipped in behind the OP-5. A heartbeat later, one trooper was staring into Dair's face. Dair noticed him, too, and jerked the vehicle sharply to the left again. The trooper wasn't caught off-guard like his compatriot had been. Leaning in, he grabbed the side of the speeder and whipped his legs into the back seat.

The scout trooper grabbed Alex as she tried to take a shot at him. He pulled her into the back seat, pinning her arms down. "Stop!" she shouted. Pulling her knees up between their bodies, Alex attempted to push him away. "Dair! Stop!" she cried. "Hit the brakes!"

"What?" Dair frowned.

"Hit the brakes!"

Dair brought the OP-5 to a sudden stop and the scout trooper tumbled into the front seat. His head met the transparisteel windshield with a crack. The trooper behind them slammed into the back of the vehicle, propelled over the front end of the landspeeder and onto the tarmac.

"Go, go, go!" Alex shouted.

Dair punched the accelerator again as Alex grabbed the trooper in the front seat, tossing him over her head and across the rear of the landspeeder. His body bounced off the tarmac like a rubber doll as the speeder crossed directly in front of the obelisk-shaped control tower and closer to the shuttle.

"You okay?" Dair asked.

"Yeah," Alex replied, rubbing her neck.

Blaster fire struck the back of the landspeeder. Alex grabbed her blaster rifle from the floorboard and turned to inspect the next threat. "They just keep coming!"

Dair threw a quick glance back and spotted the half dozen speeder bikes that had taken up the pursuit and were now closing in. A few seconds later, Dair brought the OP-5 to a stop a few meters from the escape shuttle's hatch.

"A *Lambda*-class shuttle against Imperial starfighters?" Alex moaned as several shots nicked the landspeeder.

"It's good your friends showed up, eh?"

"Right," she shouted as she jumped from the landspeeder.

Dair vaulted over the side of the vehicle and targeted the nearest scout trooper to provide cover for Alex. He fired, and another speeder bike burst into flames.

Alex sprinted across the tarmac. She paused at the bottom of the shuttle's ramp, turning to provide cover for Dair.

Another speeder bike had circled and came in from their right. A blast from its laser cannon caught Alex's hand, ripping the blaster rifle from her grip. Alex ignored the searing pain and pulled out her DL-18, gripping it painfully with her bloodied hands. She pounded the oncoming bike with a steady stream of fire while Dair headed up the shuttle ramp. The bike exploded, showering debris across the tarmac and into the path of its companions. Two other bikes careened into each other, and a third met Alex's deadly aim.

The ship's engines fired, and Alex scrambled up the ramp, hitting the release to close the door as the shuttle rose from the tarmac. She ripped off her jacket and wrapped it around her wounded hand. Blaster fire pinged harmlessly off the hull as she joined Dair in the cockpit, took the controls and guided the shuttle into the atmosphere.

"Signal acknowledged," Dair reported. "If we get shot down, it won't be because of your friends."

"What do you mean, shot down? You're with one of the best pilots in Blue Squadron!"

"Blue?" he chuckled. "What kind of name is that for an elite fighting squad?"

Alex rolled her eyes. "It's unassuming. Subtle."

"Ah. Yeah, okay. I get it," he replied.

"Can you get the wing commander on the comm?" she asked as she punched a half dozen buttons on the cockpit display to ensure shields were up and weapons were ready. Bloody fingerprints covered the console.

"Alex, you're bleeding!" Dair grasped her arm and unwrapped the bandage she'd created. "Half your hand is gone!" Dair opened his jacket and ripped fabric from his own shirt. He took her hand and gently wrapped the cloth around the wound.

"Stop exaggerating," she barked. "It's only a couple of fingers. Really, I'm okay. Let me get us out of here."

"Another signal coming in. Coordinates."

"Punch them into the nav computer."

Dair's fingers flew across the console. "Done."

Seconds later, the shuttle made the jump into hyperspace.

Staring out the viewport, Alex watched the stars blur past the ship. Relaxing, she reached out with the Force, knowing she would find the strength to face her fears. She would not go down the dark path. *We will meet again, Alex.* Skywalker's words.

Without thinking, Alex's hands played lightly across the ship's controls, and she punched a new set of coordinates into the nav computer.

"You're changing course?" Dair asked.

"It's time to go to Yavin," she said, a far-off look in her eyes. "Someone is waiting there for me. I can feel it."

The Force will be with you ...always.

Charlene Newcomb is a librarian in Kansas and author of numerous short stories published in the Star Wars Adventure Journal and republished on Hyperspace, and in Star Wars: Tales from the Empire. "Shades of Gray" marks a brand new and previously unpublished Alex Winger adventure.